

Stroller Flâneur

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I push my son in a stroller through the neighborhood. Wandering with no agenda other than outside time with my child, I reflect upon this locomotion that constitutes the most public and stereotyped activities of motherhood. The pace of the walk forces me to notice the minutiae of suburbia, examining the environment for patterns and narratives. Semi-tropical Florida, Home Depot domesticity, traces of the historic—but little known—Liberty Hill African-American community, evidence of the current recession, and the omnipresent desperate drone of condominium construction collide in the geography that constitutes my local. I attempt to discern the genealogy of architectural structures and topographies, visually leafing through the layers of additions, subtractions, road surfaces and plantings. Simultaneously, I search for items of possible interest to my son—animals, vehicles, and lawn decorations. With the advent of intelligible speech, he, too, participates in this free association. A dialectic emerges between

me, my son, and my surroundings that recalls my own history. I wonder if the presence of my son intensifies that which evokes nostalgia for the past/my childhood.

My observations of the local environment become a collage of both real and imagined systems that serve as metaphors for understanding the place where I live. The data of these habitual walks is the accretion of perusals followed by a distillation of “whatever is, worth emphasizing as a specimen of significant transformations of the public scene” (Morowski, 1994, p. 188). Time is spent gleaning resources associated with homemaking—fallen fruit, cast off furniture, baby gear and toys—and locating the exotic in the personalized details of mass produced architecture and topographies—recollecting England in the second-floor windows of a faux Tudor cottage, ascertaining the origin of the plants in people's yards—Lowe's ready-mades or specimens from a local nursery, peering into the lit windows and open garages, manufacturing narratives determined by a limited glimpse of an interior, writing biographies based upon the bumper stickers affixed to parked vehicles, deciphering the layers of pavement and road surfaces for clues that belie a history older than me.

The methodology that informs this piece is a gendered riff on the practice of the flâneur where the necessity of childcare is the platform for textualizing suburban space. My version of flânerie is a spatial practice (à la de Certeau) of my neighborhood and the surrounding environs. The performance of strolling a child is indeed one of the social processes of inhabiting and appropriating the public spaces of the suburbs as well as of the city. The path that I take through this space of my neighborhood is variable, the route determined by season, weather, time, and mood, stops occurring for snacks and the occasional diaper change. “What better way to reassure oneself, to remap the local, than to tour its transformed streets? . . . The gaze of the flâneur is thus part of a tactic to appropriate not only the local, physical spaces of the city as one's own ‘turf’ . . . but also to participate in the popular sense of empire and to master even revel in the ‘emporium’” [Substitute suburbia for emporium] (Shields, 1994, p. 74).

The physical manifestation of the piece, *Stroller Flâneur*, is a video of pushing my son in a stroller around the neighborhood. Taking structural cues from Benjamin's *Arcade Project*, I document my experience of walking, looking and researching this place by collecting the multi-faceted, often conflicting signifiers of familiar suburbia to create a fractured, even strange, landscape. Several layers of audio and video are composited, forming strata of imagery—my child in the stroller, the neighborhood, virtual Google representations of the neighborhood, aerial photography, property tax assessment maps, my voice, ambient noise. My visual and aural observations periodically interrupt and focus the viewers' attention on particular aspects of the landscape with the intention to create polymorphic narratives. Flânerie is a call to participate, to play. It does not strive for accuracy, but asks those who do read its products according to Hessel to "go yourself just like me without destination on the small journeys of discovery of the fortuitous" (as cited in Frisby, 1994, p. 96). I endeavor to awaken the curiosity for the quotidian in my viewers: transforming spectators into participants yearning to explore their surrounding environments.

References

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